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AUTHOR Claywell, Gina
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ABSTRACT

Writing labs should utilize the knowledge gained from a variety of fields to enhance further their programs, particularly with regard to the study of nonverbal communication. Regardless of the sincerity and importance of the tutor's suggestions, nonverbal messages often are sent to the student which undermine the session. Various channels of teacher nonverbal communication can be constructively analyzed, including "leakage" of low expectations, proximity, use of space, body contact, head-nods, eye contact, appearance and dress. Furthermore, nonverbal communication patterns change radically between cultures and ethnic groups. Teachers might try a variety of strategies by which they might detect and improve these manifestations of nonverbal communication, including videotaping class sessions. Studies have shown that nonverbal cues actually do communicate high and low expectancies of students, suggesting the importance of increasing awareness of this little discussed aspect of teaching. (HB)

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Gina Claywell

Nonverbal Communication and Writing Lab Tutorials

by Gina Claywell
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Composition theory and literary theory often adopt multi-disciplinary approaches which strengthen their philosophical bases and broaden their vision. Writing labs should also utilize the knowledge gained from a variety of fields to further enhance their programs. For example, we are all aware intuitively of the psychological trauma some students experience when trying to write and of the emotional upset others experience when "having" to visit a writing lab. The fields of psychology, speech communication, and anthropology, among others, have some very interesting applications for writing labs, not the least of which is the study of nonverbal communication. Regardless of the sincerity and importance of a tutor's suggestions, mixed messages can and often are sent to the student via nonverbal communication, thus undermining the tutorial session. We send a lot of information, often conflicting information, through body language. It becomes necessary, then, to consider the rhetoric of our arms and legs!

Freida Hammermeister and Marjorie Timms say in a 1989 article in Volta Review that "the impact of our nonverbal patterns of behavior is often underestimated or ignored" (133). But, rhetoricians of the Enlightenment carefully studied the placement of their hands and feet to achieve certain effects in their audience. They devoted handbooks to it, and while that is not necessary--or even useful--for modern communication, we nevertheless need to consider our nonverbal messages in writing lab tutorials, as well as in student conferences and in the writing classroom.

Hammermeister and Timms examine knowledge about nonverbal communication in light of teaching Hearing-Impaired students, but since, as they say, "a single channel by itself transmits insufficient information between interactors" (140), then monitoring the verbal channel alone is inadequate even for those students who aren't hearing-impaired. Speech alone isn't

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enough for the students who enter writing centers for help. So what, other than speech, can we be made aware of as tutors? The channels of nonverbal communication have been identified as body movements, posture, proximity and use of space, bodily contact, hand gestures, head-nods, facial expressions, eye contact and gaze, appearance, and paralanguage (Hammermeister and Timms 134). Let's examine some of these in the writing lab context.

In a study of children, Elizabeth McAllister reports that teacher expectations for individuals affected teacher body language and subsequently affected student self-expectations and achievement. How we reveal our expectations is called "leakage" and leakage occurs most often through the body--the face is easiest to control (Hammermeister and Timms 136). Not only can knowledge of this help us control our emotions and attitudes, but it can also help us examine the sometimes contradictory messages our students send. What their face and words are saying may not be what they're truly feeling about their writing. Hammermeister and Timms cite such activities as "Hands tearing at fingernails, the holding of knees or digging at the cheek," and the "repetition of foot or leg movements" as possible signs of leakage (136).

Steven Grubaugh also suggests that we can detect student messages by reading their body language, thus judging their mood and rate of understanding. In an almost tautological circle, our reading of students' behavior again affects us: Brooks and Woolfolk say that student attentiveness affects teacher impressions and subsequent behaviors.

Another channel of nonverbal communication we must examine as we interact with students is proximity and use of space. In a classroom situation, Hammermeister and Timms suggest that most participation comes from students seated directly opposite the instructor. However, only in restaurants do friends sit opposite one another. Furthermore, the authors say that a head-on orientation is often chosen for confrontations (136). This has obvious ramifications for writing-lab tutorials and teacher-student conferences and is a point which has often been considered. Generally, the evidence cited by the authors mentioned herein suggests that a side-by-side

arrangement is psychologically conducive to a less-aggressive tutorial session.

The distance people sit or stand from each other is another important aspect of nonverbal communication and varies across cultures. Sanders and Wiseman report that different collegiate cultural groups emphasize different kinds of communication. Ilona Leki cites anecdotal evidence that body language indeed differs among nationalities. She says Latin American and Arabian students may sit or stand extremely close compared to North American students (77). Knowledge of this is crucial in avoiding misunderstanding or discomfort as we tutor.

Leki's evidence extends into other channels of nonverbal communication such as Body Contact. She suggests that Vietnamese students may not be comfortable with being physically touched (77). Marianne LaFrance further suggests that girls and women are touched more often than boys and men in educational environments; she also suggests that touch is a sign of status in many cases rather than a sign of affection. Nevertheless, Hammermeister and Timms say touch can be a positive reinforcer (136). Should we reach out to a student obviously struggling with difficulties? Perhaps the answer to the question truly does depend on the individual situation. As for gender differences, Hechtman and Rosenthal report that undergraduate instructors behave more positively in instructing students for whose gender the material being taught is stereotypically appropriate, and vice-versa. Are we guilty of this in tutorials--specifically in relation to the subject matter of the writing? Not only must we monitor our behavior, but we must also consider our attitudes in order to be the most effective tutors and teachers possible.

Other areas of nonverbal communication involve head-nods and eye contact. How often these channels are used varies racially according to Robert S. Feldman, and it varies culturally according to Leki. Feldman says that white and black North Americans show different patterns of head-nodding and eye gazing and that teacher nonverbal behavior is related to teacher attitudes. Leki says that El Salvadoran students complain that Americans don't look them

in the eye (therefore suggesting that they may perceive Americans as lying, evasive or insincere). Japanese students, on the other hand, prefer not to look directly into another's eyes, according to Leki. On campuses with a wide cross-cultural composition, what's a tutor to do?!

Again, the individual situation will determine the response. Hammermeister and Timms do say that a direct gaze can be positively reinforcing in our culture; along with head-nods and facial signals, gaze can suggest involvement, approval, and encouragement (138). Interestingly, news reporters taught by old-school methods will gaze intently but forego head-nodding during on-camera interviews, because the head-nod so evidently suggests approval with the interviewee.

Another nonverbal channel is appearance; how should we dress? That question depends on whether we view ourselves as tutors or peers. Generally, writing labs do themselves a professional and political favor by adopting a minimal dress code for its tutors, but strictly formal attire usually does not put students at ease, either. A moderate professionalism, then, is in order.

So, how can we detect and improve all these channels of nonverbal behavior? Hammermeister and Timms suggest using videotape (140). Some schools routinely videotape first-year composition instructors as they lecture, but why not use videotape to record tutorials? The results can be effective not only in examining nonverbal behavior, but also in evaluating the actual content of the tutorial. They could become effective tutor training tools. Other suggestions include rearranging rooms for maximum student comfort, increasing positive nonverbal feedback to encourage students, and sharpening our ability to read our students' nonverbal behavior (Hammermeister and Timms 140).

Again, why is all this necessary when successful tutorials have been conducted for years now? Because our nonverbal behavior really does show. Babad, Bernieri, and Rosenthal report on their examination of videotaped teacher responses to both high and low expectancy students. Facial and other nonverbal channels communicated teacher expectancies of those students. When

we're least aware of it, it shows!

Examining psychological factors such as nonverbal communication can help not only writing lab tutors and directors, but also composition instructors in increasing the quality of their one-to-one student conferences and of their in-class performance. It can likewise aid in discovering possible reasons why some peer-edit sessions and class discussions prove to be virtual failures. Nonverbal channel awareness also has practical applications for everyday professional and personal interactions.

Being a good tutor or an effective teacher is difficult; doing either requires one to attend to a number of problems at once. Awareness of every possible signal the body may be emitting would be frustrating, if not impossible, and if carried to its extreme might hamper communication altogether, just as an overriding concern with surface error can stifle a students' writing abilities. However, let's keep in mind that we are all people watchers, and as Hammermeister and Timms point out, nonverbal language can be "loud and powerful" in its silence (133, 140). Actions really can be louder than words!

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